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Remembering Auschwitz-Birkenau: "Statistics and Images"

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Lauran Henderson

Statistics and Images

Up until recently, my holocaust education had been handed down to me through books and lectures. My vision of Auschwitz was represented by glossy black and white photos of shambling skeletons being led out of the maw of a wrought iron and brick monster, and to be honest, it is easy to confront a monster when it only exists in a book.

My books' failure was in the fact that they only spoke in numbers. 6 million Jews. 3 million Soviets. 2 million ethnic Poles. 1.5 million Romani. 250,000 Disabled. And many more. While numbers are powerful and dynamic to mathematicians, the number of zeros behind a single digit can never really convey the same messages that 12 foot walls of glass guarding the shaved hair of prisoners can. Numbers do not speak the same way the lack of words present to describe the faces of men and women who know they are going die can. I have learned more from the clawed concrete slabs of the gas chamber at Auschwitz than I have from any chapter in a textbook. And even after several weeks, confronting the monster that is Auschwitz-Birkenau in person has left me shaken, but I remain firm in my belief that Holocaust history is a heart breaking but absolutely necessary history that must be taught. From the hidden monuments of the Shoah in Paris to the empty hills of Plazów and the blaring music and swastika tiled floors of the propaganda room in the Schindler museum, these places serve not only as vivid reminders of what happened, but as learning experiences in the representation of national memory to a travesty that will affect all humanity.

I was reminded that divides between people fail to exist when suitcases, shoes, pots, pans, prosthetic legs, crutches, and eye glasses laying in heaping piles behind glass walls do not differentiate among race, religion, and sexuality, even seventy years later. I learned not only to recognize the different ways nations take credit for their heinous actions related to the Shoah, but also that these actions could not have been carried out without the defining of an "other" in society. I decided that as members of the human race we have an obligation to treat each other with respect and kindness and in the words of Holocaust survivor Raphael Esrail "shout to the world what some men did to other men."